

Tbilisi Transport Policy and Reforms: Main issues and recommendations



After growing public pressure, in 2018, Tbilisi City Hall declared its intention to pursue a more human-focused sustainable transport policy after decades of car-centric urban planning. International financial institutions, primarily the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) have invested significantly in the reforms process, but the myriad of problems – from congestion to overcrowding in public transit – have persisted.

There are several culprits for the unresolved issues. Despite Tbilisi Land Use Masterplan, the city's key long-term strategic document, officially declaring compact, transit-oriented development a guiding principle for the city's future urban growth, in practice, City Hall has given little consideration to transport issues in decision making on urban development.

Further, Tbilisi's transport policy remained limited and constrained. The city's Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (SUMP), which is crucial for better integrating sustainability and establishing a guiding vision and priorities for transport in the city, has remained in a perpetual state of development since 2019. Consequently, reforms and new projects are developed and carried out without a comprehensive, well-thought-out, publicly agreed upon action plan. As a result, in several cases, the steps taken by the city government contradict their stated goals. For example, the

For more information

Mariam Patsatsia
Community support
coordinator
CEE Bankwatch Network
mariam.patsatsia@bankwatch.org

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purchase of diesel buses contradicts the initiative to create a relatively eco-friendly vehicle fleet. Maintaining one-way traffic on wide roads is against the idea of pedestrian priority. Even though the city developed a cycling masterplan for Tbilisi over a year ago, City Hall has already begun to defy its recommendations.

Development of a 110-kilometre bus lane, a backbone of the restructured public transport system, has been extremely slow, with a mere 11 kilometers of the lanes being installed annually since 2018. With the current pace, it will take four more years before the fragmented system is fully connected and functional.

Bus priority enforcement has been another issue as bus lanes are often used for evading congestion, and often by law enforcement themselves. Bike lanes have shared the same fate.

Tbilisi city authorities have been also reluctant to engage the public in decision-making regarding the ongoing reform processes. They have overlooked the public's concerns and have completely neglected to do any outreach or campaigning on their policies. TUDA claims to address local concerns through daily meetings and by monitoring ongoing issues, while utilising social media for communicating on policy and reform efforts. However, their reliance on these tactics alone fails to demonstrate a comprehensive approach to public participation and lacks essential elements such as a dedicated transport policy website and targeted information campaigns.

The extent of international financial institutions' involvement in Tbilisi's urban mobility, especially that of the EBRD and ADB, who have been part of the process since the beginning, points to the responsibility of these institutions to ensure the success of public transport reform in Tbilisi as well. Notably, both the EBRD and ADB have been made aware of the shortcomings of public participation within Tbilisi's public transit projects. But it is not clear what steps the banks have taken to ensure improvements in this realm within their respective projects.

Recommendations

For City Hall

- Better integrate urban planning issues into decision-making on transport systems, and vice versa.
- Finalise the SUMP as soon as possible, ensuring broad public participation in the discussions on its draft. Clear goals, including decarbonisation, timelines and measures for success, should be shared and communicated clearly and widely with the public.
- The reforms process and planning should be open to public consultation, and information on changes to traffic should be disseminated before the changes take place.
- Make sure that the SUMP considers gender and SOGIE principles, undergoes such assessments and integrates them to develop an inclusive mobility system.
- Restore the integrity of bus lanes to ensure their exclusive use by buses as intended, crack down on violators and force the hand of the police to improve enforcement of bus priority rules, especially among their own leadership and staff.

- Effective communication should go beyond promoting individual measures and strive to elucidate the guiding principles and long-term objectives that shape the city's transport policy. By providing a holistic narrative, including the transport policy's underlying social, gender-related and environmental concerns, the public can develop a deeper appreciation for the rationale behind the measures and actively engage in shaping the future of transportation in Tbilisi.

For international financial institutions

- Help City Hall improve bus lane priority enforcement.
- Help the city ensure electric public transport development and phase out fossil-fuel-based transport.
- Ensure that improvements on information disclosure and that commitments in the stakeholder engagement plan are followed through.
- Future investment decisions regarding the urban planning and financing programmes Green Cities, in the case of the EBRD, and Livable Cities, in the case of the ADB, should be conditioned upon the city's readiness to commit to active information disclosure and public consultations. Consideration of sustainability-related measures and a commitment to them in previous projects should also factor into the decision making.
- The Tbilisi Green City Action Plan (part of their participation in the EBRD's Green Cities programme) should include clear qualitative and quantitative indicators that are designed in a participatory manner and shared publicly. Information on GCAP implementation and monitoring data, with regards to both its progress and its impact, should be made publicly available.
- Ensure that the projects are in line with best international practices and integrate sexual orientation and gender identity data, develop a Tbilisi-specific gender risk assessment in line with gender-based violence and SOGIE principles, elaborate upon the action plan for implementation, and ensure it is carried out by respective project sponsors.